

By Dennis Anderson October 25, 2011

Two powerful congressmen who represent the Antelope Valley are leading a bipartisan group of more than two dozen representatives who want the Government Accounting Office to investigate why benefit appointments take so long to process at the Department of Veterans Affairs' Los Angeles Regional Office and why there are such long delays scheduling health care appointments in the VA's Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

The request for the GAO study comes from Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, who is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, who is House Majority Whip, the representative in charge of lining up support for GOP legislation.

The Los Angeles Regional Office provides benefits and services to approximately 706,000 veterans in the Southern California counties of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, Ventura, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Kern. VA benefits expenditures for veterans in the jurisdiction of the regional office exceed \$800 million annually.

Much of the care administered through the VA Los Angeles Healthcare System is provided at the massive West Los Angeles Medical Center, but the department also maintains a clinic in Lancaster and other communities.

"Delays have become the rule rather than the exception and that is unacceptable," McCarthy said in a telephone interview Monday evening from Washington.

He noted that this year in his Kern County-based district, which also includes about half of Lancaster, his office has had to do 149 constituent interventions about veteran claims and appointments not being processed, with the average wait around 236 days.

"Last year we had 200" such interventions, he said. "It's not acceptable."

In the letter filed by McKeon and McCarthy, the two leading GOP representatives stated, "Each year our offices assist thousands of veterans in their efforts to wade through red tape and delays for both benefits and medical care."

The letter continued, "While our offices are happy to assist it appears the intervention on behalf of our constituents is becoming commonplace for even the simplest and most routine VA matters."

No spokesman for the VA Los Angeles regional office or Healthcare system could be immediately tracked down on evening deadline in a website that is dense with information but has no public information phone number to seek assistance.

The request to GAO is signed by 28 congressional representatives, including Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and Darrell Issa, chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Among signatures on the letter are prominent liberal House representatives such as Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, Howard Berman, D-Los Angeles, and Rep. Judy Chu, D-El Monte.

"We didn't have a hard time at all getting bipartisan support for this," McCarthy said. "Buck and I just took it around and people signed on."

The letter asks the office that deals with government accountability to investigate why disability claims take an average of 236 days to process after they are originally submitted. Appeals of decisions can take up to two years to process before the VA releases any funds, meaning often that "our veterans go without the benefits or care they need."

Basically, the letter asks GAO to determine what are the policies and procedures that result in the extended waits for care and benefits.

The congress members ask "a review of the effectiveness of policies, if any, designed to keep veterans apprised of the status of their claim and a determination if those policies are being followed."

In the matter of scheduling health care appointments, the request seeks "an evaluation of all the paperwork, forms, and other information veterans are required to submit with a claim and if all of this information is necessary prior to scheduling any medical examinations.

"Finally, we request that the GAO study include recommendations, both administrative and/or legislative, to shorten the claims processing time and improve customer services, access to health care, status updates and other interactions with veterans who enlist VA services at the VA Los Angeles Regional Office and within the Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System."

The request for the GAO report arrives a few months after the Ninth Circuit Court ruled that the VA had "failed egregiously" in providing mental health care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, often with deadly consequences for veterans traumatized from combat who commit suicide.

The court ordered the VA to provide care and clean up its problems in delivery of care. The VA appealed and the case appears headed for the Supreme Court, with District Judge Steven Reinhardt noting that "life and death consequences" are occurring daily while the government delays.